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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: RESTAURANTS AND CAFES ORDERED CLOSED
FOR NEW YEAR'S

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Private restaurants and cafes in Ashgabat have been closing their doors, reportedly at the unwritten order of Turkmen government officials. Embassy staff have reported that most restaurants in downtown Ashgabat are closed, during what is usually the busiest time of the year for restaurants and cafes. Beginning December 20, private restaurateurs were reportedly told by representatives of the Office of Economic Crimes in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and local police that all restaurants and cafes must close their doors for business immediately and they would not be permitted to reopen until January 3, 2010. As of December 29, only a few private restaurants and cafes refused to close. There was reportedly no written order given; owners were contacted in-person at their places of business. Our contacts stated that government officials cited the December 5 nightclub fire in Perm, Russia, which killed over 150 people, as the reason for the closings.

¶2. (C) Although Russian media reported that Turkmen President Berdimuhamedov ordered all restaurants and cafes closed, local owners have complained that restaurants and cafes owned by the Ministry of Commerce or the President's Office have not closed. Locals have reported that their annual company parties were not canceled if they were held at government-owned restaurants. There is also speculation that some private restaurant owners with close ties to the president's family have not been ordered to close their doors.

¶3. (C) One example of a restaurant that has stayed open is the popular Chinese restaurant in the government-owned Aziya hotel. One emboff ate there the evening of December 28 and found the place (uncharacteristically) packed. Emboff even ran into Institute of Democracy and Human Rights Director Shirin Akhmedova, who was there with a group of friends.

¶4. (C) One private restaurant owner, who owns two very popular restaurants in Ashgabat, contacted the Embassy on December 29, stating that he would refuse to close until he

received an official, written, government order, but he wanted the U.S. Embassy to know what was happening. He claimed that he had contacted his friends at the Ministry of National Security (MNB), who agreed to try to help him "keep the police from shutting down his restaurants." He also shared that he was told by Ashgabat police that he would not receive a written order to close his business, but instead he would be convinced to close "through other measures." On December 30, he reported that despite his attempts to remain open, one of his restaurants was closed late on December 29 by police, who entered the restaurant with several officers and forced customers and staff to vacate. The owner noted with surprise that his second, smaller restaurant remains open, and police have not yet harassed him to close it.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: It is difficult to ascertain if the Turkmen President himself actually ordered all restaurants and cafes to be closed for the holidays for reported safety reasons. It is plausible that lower-level government officials are using the threat to close restaurants and cafes to extort bribes and are using the President's name for their own purposes. Who would question a "presidential order?" In fact, police officials and establishment owners have cited other reasons for the closure. At the same time, private restaurant owners have asserted that the closings targeted private businesses, thus allowing government-owned restaurants to benefit from displaced customers during the busy holiday season. END COMMENT.

CURRAN